

## **BRIDGES 2006**

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## **BRIDGES - Encountering Epiphany**

by Joyce Michael

In the past, I have occasionally observed that these up-dates frequently appear to come in thematic pairs. Yet, when I wrote the Christmas BRIDGES in mid-December, I could not have guessed that a companion piece to that message would emerge before the new year had scarcely begun. However, significant encounters with the vitality of the Christmas promise continued to emerge even after January had arrived. Thus, this greeting will focus on experiences of Epiphany or, as it is known here, "Three Kings Day."

Already on January 5, I glimpsed three young people wearing crowns from the window of a tram. When I mentioned this sighting to John, he explained that these 'kings' were actually representatives of Catholic Charities seeking donations for their work. Yet, on January 6, a teenaged student waiting with me at the bus stop across from her school was carrying a cardboard crown that she apparently had made during the day, and a tall young man wearing a regal costume of velvet and fur had positioned himself near an entrance to the Metro station where he attracted many curious looks from people like me who were surprised to see a king. Perhaps, he was involved in some sort of promotional activity, here in this city where advertising sometimes takes very creative and immediate forms. However, for me, his very presence provided a reminder of the liturgical quality of this day when the gift of Christmas is received wherever power-possessed people dare to humbly kneel in celebration of a baby's birth.

Likewise, on January 7, John came home after spending a Saturday afternoon at the office, radiating a sense of wonder and delight at his own encounter with Epiphany. He had been privileged to hear a violinist, a guitarist, a keyboard player, and a group of singers who were also associated with Catholic Charities perform a moving rendition of *Adestes Fideles*. "O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord" they sang in Czech, inviting the people who heard them to step out of the cold, dark realities of our wintry world into the light of God's love. As John described his experience to me, I had a strong sense he had encountered a true Epiphany on an ordinary Saturday afternoon in the center of a bustling city nestled within a "secular" society.

My recollections of the post-Christmas milieu in the United States are rather hazy. However, I do not remember seeing many kings or hearing many carols in Ohio after the start of the new year. Church members regularly accompany the shepherds and angels to Bethlehem, but fewer undertake the journey of the Magi unless January 6 happens to fall on Sunday. So I can't help but wonder why, in this professedly atheistic society, Epiphany is remembered in a comparatively active way, especially in light of one person's observation that during the communist era, the tradition of Epiphany was largely forgotten. Perhaps Three Kings' Day is more accessible here where kings figure prominently in national history and in folktales. Perhaps the entire Christmas tradition is so unfamiliar to many Czech people that all parts of the story are given equal weight by those who are seeking to recover its truths. Or perhaps at this time when people in many places are longing so deeply for a starburst of hope, the time to celebrate Epiphany is at hand. I pray that you have had some rare encounters with the God who dares to come as a powerless king, so that we may learn that the ways of humility and peace which are the hallmark of love.

## **BRIDGES - A Noble Way**

by Joyce Michael

When 2006 arrived, I supposed that my translation of a book entitled *Five Circuits Through Prague in the Footsteps of the Czech Reformation* would be completed by the end of February, so that I could attend to more “routine” tasks in a timely way. However, preparing that detailed text for publication was more time-intensive than I expected, and, when all was said and done, it was nearly the end of April before my work was finished. Along the way, I composed several BRIDGES in my mind, but now that I have time to put these into writing, I hardly know where to begin. You see, John and I are now in the United States for several months of “mission interpretation.” The opportunities and challenges of this part of our work have been underscored by the fact that immediately after we arrived in Ohio, we were profoundly saddened to learn that deep budget cuts mean that a number of good friends and cherished colleagues will no longer be present to assist us with projects and to receive our greetings when we visit the national church offices in Louisville. In light of the life-changing measures that are being implemented within the ranks of the very people who support and enable our daily work and life in the Czech lands, I wondered how I could rhapsodize about an insight gleaned from a “Czech encounter.” Yet, as the days went on, I knew that I must rhapsodize in honor, and on behalf of, the people at the Worldwide Ministries Division who have taken great care to attend to day-to-day details in recent months, even as the likelihood of impending changes must have cast a dark cloud over even the most routine tasks.

For example, in early February, we learned that the health insurance requirement for obtaining a Czech visa has changed for the third time in six years. Within ten days, we would need a statement from the church guaranteeing insurance coverage. “We must phone Brunhilda,” I declared. “If she can send a letter in the next couple of days, we should have plenty of time.” I heard John’s voice “light up” as Brunhilda herself answered the phone, and, in her warm and inimitable way, assured him that a letter would be sent that very afternoon. We appreciated her efficient response, but, over and above that, we were grateful for the personal and encouraging words of greeting that she extended to us. We will miss her deeply.

On another occasion, I sent a note to everyone who was present at the formation of the Czech Mission Network in 2004, regarding a person who had expressed interest in participating in that group. In no time at all, Les Sauer had replied. “I will add that information to our data base,” he promised, before giving me the name of a person whom he had just met. “I think that she would enjoy receiving Bridges,” he wrote. Les’ involvement with 26 mission networks must have confronted him with an overwhelming volume of e-mail and personal contacts. Yet, he treated each person and every bit of correspondence as if it was a cherished treasure. No connection was overlooked and ‘no person was left behind’ by this master web-spinner. He will also be deeply missed.

At 5:30 a.m. on April 23, I went to the Prague airport, to meet a participant in PC(USA)’s Young Adult Volunteer Program who has Czech roots. Sarah is serving in Cairo, Egypt, where satisfying experiences directing a school for refugee children have been darkened by biases against single, young, American women. Sarah is strong, vivacious, and intelligent, but Victor Makari sensed her weariness and encouraged her to come to Prague for a breather. It was delightful to watch Sarah sparkle as she roamed freely through Prague without being harassed or threatened. Again, in the midst of a crushing work load, Victor recognized a need and enabled a connection that brought joy to Sarah and renewal to John and me.

Although WMD is sometimes viewed as being a cumbersome administrative body, I have consistently found people like Brunhilda, Les, and Victor (who will continue to coordinate work in the Middle East) to be anything but cogs in an impersonal machine. Indeed, the people that I have met at WMD all seem to realize that the command to “love our neighbor as we love ourselves” means that we are called to see, hear, and care for the individual person as he or she is, even when our own futures are uncertain and our own souls are weary. Let us take up the mantle of these caring church leaders, and build on the foundations that they have established by unselfishly utilizing our time, our insights, and our resources in a Christ-like mode of service that will transcend our most instinctive anxieties.

## **BRIDGES - In the Footsteps of the Reformation**

by Joyce Michael

While translating *Through Prague in the Footsteps of the Czech Reformation*, I was filled with a strong desire to walk the five circuits that compose this historical “guidebook.” Translating the book’s factual content was a fairly straightforward endeavor, but accurately rendering its directions was a more “delicate” undertaking. For example, since “u” can mean “near, at, in, next to, on, with, over, alongside, by, about, beside, or around,” selecting the correct preposition was difficult in cases where I was not already familiar with the location being described. Thus, even after working carefully with a map, I realized that I could not submit my translation to the publisher until I had traced each of the circuits on foot. I hope that my memories of those excursions will give you a sense of the vital ways in which the Czech Reformation continues to inspire interest and devotion.

Perhaps the most memorable of these outings occurred at dusk on a cloudy evening in February. I left John’s office, where I had been working in isolation, around 4 p.m., intent on checking a few directions that were too subtle to be confirmed with a map. Upon arriving at the Old Town Square, I was glad to discover that most of my renderings had been accurate. Moreover, I experienced a certain sense of exhilaration as I recalled the events that made familiar places particularly note-worthy or even hallowed. No longer was I trapped in words and lost in detail. I was out there where it all happened! It was already too dark for me to read my text as I walked along, but since I seemed to be remembering my questions and resolutions pretty well, I left the square and headed toward the river where I soon had located all of the sites that were in doubt. Upon re-entering the square, I soon happened upon a group of tourists who had stopped beside of the Hus Memorial. Although I could not tell what language they were speaking, I was certain that an act of remembrance was taking place as that little group spontaneously began to sing a quiet hymn of praise. How curious that I should come to this place at the very time that an impromptu celebration of Hus’ legacy was taking place. I was humbly grateful.

My next excursion took place on Good Friday, when I returned to the Old Town Square where a throng of people had assembled in spite of strong winds and heavy rain. My destination that day was a memorial plaque on the Old Town Hall which lists the leaders of the Protestant uprising who were executed at that spot in 1621. As I stood near the 27 mosaic crosses that have been placed in the cobblestones to memorialize the deaths of those brave men, my studied concentration was broken as I listened to a young Czech man

recounting the story of that sad occurrence to two English-speaking guests. Although some secular tour guides do not seem to have a very profound sense of the significance of Hus and the Czech Reformation, this man was bringing that movement to life with rich detail and respectful reverence. The story lives, I gratefully concluded as I left that important location

From time to time throughout the other walks that I took on Easter weekend, I experienced moments of wonder as I stopped at hitherto unknown – or at least unnoticed – sites. However, the most meaningful journey of all took place on a blustery Easter Monday when John and I made our way to White Mountain, where the defeat of the Protestant troops in 1620 eventuated in the Thirty Years War and the start of the Counter-Reformation. We had been to the park near the memorial at White Mountain several times without being aware of the exact location of the battle. This time, however, we followed the directions as humble pilgrims, and, lo and behold, we were not alone. As we approached the field which leads to the memorial mound that marks the battle site, we saw several other pilgrims making their way down from that special place. “People still come here – to this distant place at the edge of Prague – even when the wind is whipping and rain is falling,” I marveled. The story of White Mountain and the legacy of Czech Protestantism could not be stamped out even when it appeared to have been silenced. The heritage of Hus and those who championed his commitment to Truth could not be pushed into oblivion. Thus, people still make their way to White Mountain and other reformation sites in order to ponder the chalice and to give thanks for the heritage of unity before God, and in Christ, that it symbolizes. Thanks be to God.

## **BRIDGES - A Study Beyond our Comfort Zone”** by Beverly Schmidt

**Joyce’s preface:** Initially, I imagined that BRIDGES would become a “conversational” forum. Although I was looking forward to describing events in the Czech Republic in a timely way, I was also eager to receive questions, comments, announcements, and articles about Czech connections from interested Presbyterians in the United States. It has taken a while for this notion to “catch on.” However, in recent weeks, Beverly Schmidt has begun to fulfill that hope by sending an announcement regarding the ECCB’s up-coming international youth conference to BRIDGES’ recipients and by preparing this article that I am pleased to share with you.

A long-standing group of women, primarily from Covenant Presbyterian Church in Columbus, Ohio, undertook the challenge of working with Božena Komárková’s *Human Rights and the Rise of the Secular Age* during the fall of 2005. We were used to reading “cutting edge” biblical and theological literature, as well as books by feminist theologians who help us understand and live our journey as faithful Christian women in a post-Christian, post-enlightenment era. Our group has reached a level of trust and intimacy that enables us to speak our thoughts, no matter how radical, within the safety of a group of sisters committed to love and friendship. It was a good thing we were at such a level, for Komárková inspired some fierce reflections on the political order of our nation at this time.

Dr. Komárková (1903-1997) was a profound intellectual who endured Nazi imprisonment and curtailed vocational prospects during the communist era. From the time she completed her dissertation on human rights through the fall of the communist regime, she wrote on sociology, philosophy, history, and theology. We were fortunate to have two women join the group who had postgraduate backgrounds in literature and language. Katie Kinnison, now a church educator, and Kathy Burkman, retired Ohio State University professor of English and theatre, and a playwright in her retirement, supported our readings with references to Czech novels and plays that gave us a broader sense of the unique Czech character.

We began with a discussion of the role of the intelligentsia. The clergy, who once had been advisors to the kings, lost the coercive spiritual power that they wielded for many centuries as society became democratized. University education became available to many, rather than just a privileged few. Knowledge assumed a different character. It was no longer wisdom, but a system of judgments about external facts. Moral and intellectual spheres became separated, and the intelligentsia were no longer sure of their role in forming and nurturing moral responsibility. Our group, many of whom have backgrounds as educators and parents, discussed with concern the role of parents, teachers, and clergy in preparing today’s young people for a worthy and fulfilling life.

Moving on, we tackled an essay entitled “Are Christian Institutions Possible?” With a deep breath, we admitted that even a lifetime spent in devoted loyalty to the church does not answer the questions that are so urgent today. The Bible is ambiguous – and often contradictory – in its statements about social life. Is there another reality beyond this world which may provide us with a system accessible to human beings? Are doctrines and dogmas historically conditioned, and therefore less than perfect guides for us now? Komárková tells us that institutions which call themselves Christian are justified by Christianity, rather than created by it. Christianity is salt and leaven, so change and transformation can happen within institutions. Freedom is not of this world, but we can live freely through faith. The early church before Constantine showed how this is possible. So we women smiled at one another, knowing that our work is still before us, with the living God to guide us.

With our dictionaries, highlighters, pens and pencils handy, we let “The Two Kinds of Law” inform our understandings of “Human Rights and Christianity.” There is the type of law that is needed by technology, where the unchanging effects of the laws of nature can be predicted with absolute certainty. Marxism made this kind of law the yardstick against which human behavior could be measured. The communist era did not abolish the legal system; human nature finally could not be totally compressed into a technical form. Justice through judgment still had to be administered. However, the second kind of law goes beyond justice. Discord can be overcome only by love. In love, law and freedom meet. Our group could quote some familiar sayings from Jesus and the Bible to shore up that theological premise. Finally, we were in familiar territory. A personal relationship between God and the human being, defined by the grace of God and the experience of faith, influence not only church order, but may also transform the processes of political life.

**Joyce’s invitation:** This summary of conclusions reached by the discussion group at Covenant Church may give you a taste of the interesting conversations and diverse interpretations that Komárková’s intricate analyses invite. Thus, even if you do not have plans to travel to the Czech Republic or to host a Czech visitor at your church, your congregation may enjoy a “Czech encounter” by undertaking a study of a Czech thinker and discovering points at which that person’s insights may deepen your own understandings of contemporary issues.

## **BRIDGES - Through Others' Eyes**

by Joyce Michael

Earlier this year, I had occasion to take a new look at both Czech society and my own culture through the eyes of my English students. Perhaps you will find my remembrances of those conversations to be intriguing.

As one of my colleagues at the Protestant Theological Faculty wrestled with a book which analyzes the Holocaust, he suggested that the Nazi atrocities were not really as unique as the author of that book maintained. He spoke at length about the great toll which the American slave trade had exacted on African tribes. That was also a type of systematic genocide perpetrated by a Christian populace over a long period of time, he observed. I instinctively suggested that there may have been major differences between the Nazi movement and the practices of the slave traders. Yet, even as I spoke, I found myself challenged to face and acknowledge an indefensibly dark chapter of my nation's history. I am grateful to my friend for challenging me to recall the deaths of hundreds of thousands of black people at the hands of businessmen who thoughtlessly embarked on a reprehensible way of turning a profit.

If that examination of my country's ambiguous past was saddening, I was surprised by another colleague's conclusion that an inherent respect for other individuals is evident in the courtesy that most American drivers extend to one another on the highway. This church leader perceives that there is a notable difference between the politeness shown by motorists in the United States and the aggressive driving practices that are often apparent in the Czech Republic. When I mentioned the phenomenon of "road rage" that has surfaced on American highways in recent years, he nodded knowingly. However, he and another member of the class, who had driven from Florida to Boston the previous summer, concluded that the majority of drivers in the United States exhibit a spirit of graciousness that tends to be absent in their country, where there is an alarming number of fatal automobile accidents each year. It was fascinating to imagine that driving practices in the USA might reflect a unique level of respect for the dignity and worth of each person. Yet, after recalling that young Czech mothers are able to safely leave their babies in carriages parked outside of neighborhood shops while

they run in to purchase fruit, vegetables, or baked goods, I suggested that an equally unique level of trust and respect may characterize social interactions in the Czech Republic.

Later in the same conversation, another person declared that Czech waiters and cashiers need to be more responsive and responsible when interacting with customers. After I indicated that across the years, it has seemed to me that many workers have become more relaxed and interactive, my friend recounted an upsetting incident in which a waiter had been singularly unresponsive to a large group of church guests. Even after a spilled drink had stained one person's clothes, no apologies were extended and no reimbursement was offered. This incident left a bad "taste" in the customers' memories, which seemed to be contrary to the pleasant remembrances that my friend had of the service extended to her at various points during her travels in America.

As I consider these conversations, I am surprised at how differently my friends and I perceive our own and each other's societies. Perhaps we are more able to see positive aspects of a culture that we are entering with uncluttered vision, and maybe we tend to be more alert to the negative features of our own surroundings. Nevertheless, we may all benefit from looking at our own societies through the eyes of the other. Thus, we may be able to appreciate graceful traditions which have become so routinized that we forget to notice them. Likewise, we may recognize blemishes that we have completely pushed out of consciousness. Thus, a new, more balanced view of our own culture and that of the other may simultaneously emerge!

**If you would like to participate in a real "cross-cultural exchange," save the dates of September 21-22, 2006, and make plans to attend the first meeting of the Czech Mission Network that will be held in Erlanger Kentucky. Watch the Czech Mission Network News for more details!**

## **BRIDGES - A meditation on orientation**

by Regina Pešková

**Joyce's note:** In 2005, Regina Pešková, the general secretary of our partner church's denominational offices, began the autumn meeting of the American Working Group with a thoughtful meditation based on Genesis 28:17-19. Later, she translated her reflections into English, and our conversation class used her work to practice idiomaticization. When John and I arrived in the United States, I was surprised to find the original copy of Regina's translation in my "going to America" folder. As I read her reflections, they seemed to be remarkably appropriate at this point in time. Thus, with Regina's permission, I have adapted her reflections for this Bridges.

There are many churches in the centers of our cities and on village squares, which remind us of times long past. Although a number of churches were destroyed by war, they have been reconstructed with enormous devotion. Few churches have been abolished, but some have been built over pagan temples.

Why is this the case? Where does the human inclination to preserve churches originate? Churches and their spires used to be orientation points, sign-posts. For instance, in old paintings, we can see that church spires and domes rise above the other buildings. Anyone who has ever gotten lost and needed some orientation surely knows why such signs are so important. Then, sign-posts enable us to find a way that will take us further toward our destination – home. In less developed countries, sign-posts are regarded as sacred signs because they can save a traveler's life. But we may become even more lost in everyday living and the unsearchable depths of our souls when we realize that we have made the wrong decisions, are disappointed by our neighbors, or want to do more things than we can manage. In such cases, we need a sign, an indicator, a sign-post that says: "This is the right way."

Let's take a look at Jacob. He steals his brother's birthright, leaves his homeland, and wanders in the wilderness. Then he dreams of a ladder set up on the earth with angels of God ascending and descending on it. The angels assure Jacob that help is here, very near. God is here. "How holy this place is; it is the gateway of heaven." And what happens to Jacob? He takes courage and recovers his faith. He finds his way and his God. This sign-post means that we have found assurance, something that promotes faith; we have found our own way and discovered our God. Life is a series of tasks, challenges, and valleys that we can surmount if we know the way, if we can find God. So, we return to church time after time.

How is this connected to the church spire? Jacob takes a stone, pours oil on it, and calls the place Beth-el, the house of God. Beth-el becomes one of the greatest sanctuaries in the Old Testament. Churches are often erected similarly. The cornerstone is a memorial to God's help. The cornerstone and the spire say that it is possible to rely on God, even though there are situations in the life where everything seems lost and hopeless. God is near, although he seems to be far away. "He isn't distant, he stays in the center and listens to our urgent prayers." When we look out over the countryside from the top of a church spire, we sense that such a structure is like a rock on the sea bottom; the spire stands in the center of town and acts as a sign for our lives. Our personal orientation largely depends on the prevailing orientation in our society. When that gets lost, for instance, during wars or crises, the lives of individuals and of the whole get lost.

Church spires may act as sign-posts, not only for us as individuals, but also for the entire society. Church spires are signs that stand over earthly towns and point toward the eternal. The temporal empire ought to be oriented toward the kingdom of God. You might say that spires are only a reminder of the distant past, for churches are gradually getting lost in rows of other buildings. Yet, when we are facing the crisis of not being able to find the right way, good orientation is still helpful. The church still reminds us of the doctrine of the soul's salvation, of other people who have made life possible for us, of the love we have felt, and of the crises we have overcome. The church and its spire may still guide us through dark times, give us orientation, and restore our faith.

Church spires remind us that the human community needs a point of orientation. They reveal that God is the power behind the sign-posts, and offer confirmation that life's events have meaning, that trust is possible, that God's kingdom gives us a new chance. Church spires are sign-posts and exclamation points which offer living reminders of the Bible's stories and of the ways and words of Jesus. When we hear their bells, we remember that faith is possible because God has left signs to point the way. May it be so!

## **Bridges - Caterpillars, Ants, and YOU!**

Joyce Michael

This morning, a young girl walked by the apartment at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio where John and I are based for this portion of our itineration assignment. From her demeanor, I gathered that there was a living creature on the piece of paper that she was carrying so gingerly, and, in fact, it turned out that she had coaxed a caterpillar onto that page, so that she could show her discovery to everyone she met. As I watched that child, I was filled with a desire to follow a similar pattern with regard to letting all of you know about the up-coming gathering of the Czech Mission Network, which will take place near Cincinnati (in Erlanger Kentucky) on September 21 and 22. I have mentioned this event in the "cover-e-mails" that accompanied previous issues of BRIDGES this summer, with the hope that someone other than me would write a "sparkling" BRIDGES that would fill a number of you with a strong desire to attend that gathering. However, the steering committee has been working so diligently on preparing a dynamic event that this task has finally fallen to me.

However, I cannot appear before you with anything as fascinating as the caterpillar that I saw this morning, so I do not know how to enthrall you to take a couple of days, do a bit of traveling, spend a little money (actually, just \$99), and join us for this gathering. I might remind you that Will Browne, Jon Chapman, and Mark McCabe will be present to share the denomination's vision of mission partnerships with us. I might report that John and I have been asked to recall some anecdotes regarding humorous dissonances that sometimes occur when people from differing cultures meet up with one another. I might stress that Petr Peňáz, a pastor in the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren who studied at Dubuque Theological Seminary, is coming all the way to Erlanger to give you a first-hand glimpse of our partner denomination in the Czech Republic. I might try to summarize the planned agenda so that you could have a picture of the various topics that will be considered through the rich array of addresses, presentations, and opportunities for panel discussion and small-group sharing that have been specially designed to give participants a deeper appreciation of the ECCB and of ways that Presbyterians throughout this country can work together in forming, nurturing, and deepening partnerships with our Czech brothers and sisters in faith. However, space and time are limited, so I have decided to take a different tack, which requires that I pick up a second insect image that came to mind earlier this morning following a thoughtful phone conversation with a member of the steering committee of the Czech Mission network. A main topic of that conversation had to do with the impact that proposed changes in the structure of the GAC may have on the new Czech Mission Network. Understandably, there is some concern about where the network will find counsel and support when the structure of the GAC is realigned. Yet, it seems to me that if we consider the ant-world, there is little need to be anxious and much cause to be enthused.

You see, each spring, our apartment in Prague is invaded by ants who enter through the door to our balcony. Before they become too numerous, I take great delight in watching those little creatures scurry around. What initially appears to be random and haphazard movement eventually evinces a pattern characterized by purpose and energy. As I watch, I am particularly impressed by small ants who carry slivers of wood and other objects that are twice as big as they are. As those critters successfully tote their loads to the intended destination, I am bound to conclude that these ants' sense of direction and determination is something that we humans being might do well to emulate. Indeed, I would suggest that in this time, when we may be inclined to long for old structures that feel orderly and dependable, we may take a lesson from the ants. If we bring our very best creativity and keen interest in the preserving our connections with the ECCB to Erlanger, we not only will begin to find order and purpose in the midst of the randomness that seems to distinguish times of transition, we will also have the rare privilege of discovering a new sense of purpose and direction together. I urge you to take a hopeful leap and register for the up-coming gathering at [www.pcusamission.org](http://www.pcusamission.org). If tiny ants can carry huge loads as a matter of course, we can also accomplish great things, provided that we embrace the grand task that awaits us! **YOU ARE INVITED** to let yourself be carried along on the secure foundations of faith, hope, and commitment to the destination that God has in mind.

## **Bridges - Ecumenical Forum of Czech Women**

Introduction of the Civic Association the Ecumenical Forum of Christian Women in the Czech Republic (EFCW CR)

The EFCWCR was established in 2003, with most of its members being members of the former Women's Committee of the Ecumenical Council of Churches, which came to being in 1992. Originally the Women's Committee was designed to become a community of several women only, representing member churches of the ECC.

Since the very beginning, the members of the Committee, who had been delegated by their churches, tried to experience ecumenism in practice, precious relationships were established among the Committee members. In addition, individual members of the Committee brought other women with interest in ecumenism, good relations, and in exploring new things. With new women coming, the original committee was enlarged. The Constitution of the ECC allowed for such enlargement, and with more members the Committee was more active and capable of carrying out important tasks.

In 1995 the EUNIKA (biblical name Eunice) project was started in order to help promote broadening and establishing good contacts among women in various countries of Central Europe. We felt that after a long period of totalitarian regime, when the relations among countries and churches had not been supported and developed, it was necessary for action to strengthen mutual relations among individuals, so that they could feel close to one another. At that time we held several meetings, domestic, or with the participation of women from abroad. We organized humanitarian aid for Rumania with the financial support of the women from the Presbyterian Church of the USA, which enabled us to transport the collected things to the destination. After collecting clothing, we sorted and packed it, then loaded it into a van and sent it to Transylvania (Cluj and its neighborhood). On the Rumanian side we were helped by Rumanian women from the Reformed and Roman Catholic churches, who coordinated the distribution of the clothing among people in need, for whom our aid had been designed.

So far we have organized twenty events within the EUNIKA project, the latest was EUNIKA XX – a meeting on the occasion of the twentieth event, which also took place to commemorate ten years of the project's existence. The festive meeting was held in the evangelical congregation in Prague – Vinohrady, where the first EUNIKA meeting had taken place. The project continues.

The latest big event that we organized, at the time when we were still the Women's Committee of the ECC, was the General Assembly of the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women (EFECW). The representatives of this European body, which was established in 1982, showed interest in holding their General Assembly in the Czech Republic in 2002. And the Assembly did take place in Čelákovice (a town about 30 km from Prague). It was just two weeks after huge floods in Prague and elsewhere in the Czech Republic. In spite of the floods the GA was a successful event. The cooperation with foreign participation was perfect.

In 2003 the women's community left the ECC, and registered as a separate civic association. The reason for the separation was a newly adopted Constitution of the ECC, which defined a concept of its Committees in a different way. In the case of the Women's Committee it meant that each of the member or cooperating churches could delegate one woman only to the Committee. We would have been very sorry if we had had to dissolve our community, which had been formed for more than 10 years, and in 2003, it was already a well established ecumenical congregation having been set up by women of varying ages and professional orientations from various churches and various places in the Czech Republic. We feel that we are connected through something stronger that can overcome the above differences. Besides, we needed a large portion of independence in decision-making, and a free hand for the events that we saw ahead of us as necessary and useful.

At present this civic association has forty-four members and a number of unregistered women, who are called "Friends" of the Forum. We meet regularly about five times per year. In addition, we take part in other, mostly ecumenical events. Among these additional meetings was a meeting of Czech and Austrian women in South Bohemia early in the spring of 2005. It was filled with discussions on given topics and a sharing of experiences. We enjoyed making a trip along Czech-Austrian border.

In June 2005 the members of this group took an active part in an international ecumenical event that was held in Prague and was entitled Meeting of Christians 2005. Our contribution to the official program was a kind of Bible study in St. Havel's Church in the Prague's Old Town with a lively dialogue of two female theologians in reference to the main topic of the meeting, namely "The Inviting to Hope". In addition, at the vicarage of the Church of St. Mary before the Týn at the Old Town Square, we set up a small refreshments centre. This was an "Oasis" for visitors of the meeting. On the occasion of that meeting we issued a German version of the brochure entitled Women in the Czech History. The English version was published in 2002.

The Forum has got involved in the Project of the Catholic Charity in Ostrava (Moravia), which is focused on "distance adoption of children". This organization arranged the adoption of an eight year old Ukrainian girl Maria from Ruthenia for us (from Carpatho-Ukraine).

Our contacts with Slovak women have existed for a long time. We know about one another and are in permanent touch.

The EFCWCR, as was already said, is integrated in the EFECW, whose head office is in Brussels. The EFECW intends to extend eastwards; in this respect the Czech Forum may be a good and reliable partner in light of its geographical position as well as language. We would like to continue our meetings with Austrian and German women. We have been offered cooperation with women from the Presbyterian Church in the USA. Because of so great a distance between the two countries, most probably the contacts will not be as personal as those with European women.

In any case it is good to be in contact with women in other countries in order to share experiences and to learn more about and from one another. The women of the Presbyterian Church of the USA issue The Horizon, a periodical containing articles and theological reflections and studies. The American women suggest that both they and we might concentrate on certain articles, and exchange opinions and comments on them. Currently we are waiting to receive this year's first issue of The Horizon.

In May this year several women are going for a study trip to Strasburg. They want to know that city with rich history and of great historical value. Strasburg has become an important European political center. They are looking forward to meeting a local group of women with ecumenical orientation.

Another study trip is planned for the year 2007 to Scandinavia. Planning is already underway.

This is our past, present and future. We believe that our staying together is meaningful, and we feel that our establishing and developing the Forum was and is not only a task for us, but also a promise.

The text was prepared by Naděje Mandysová, President of EFCWCR, March 2006  
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## BRIDGES - A Worthy Commendation

I rarely devote one of these up-dates to a single individual. However, at the end of April, I heard of an event which was so special that I knew that an up-coming BRIDGES must be focused on a gallant leader of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren. Thus, at this time, I want to introduce you to a truly remarkable person.

There are some people whose ways of being are an intriguing mixture of level-headedness and abandon; other folks' endearing qualities become evident after years of acquaintance; and other persons display multi-colored shades of temperament that are almost impossible to grasp. Yet, a few rare individuals, such as the Deputy Director of the ECCB's Diaconia, radiate a spirit of wisdom and grace that is recognizable right from the start.

I had heard of **Eva Grollová** long before I met her at a meeting of the American Working Group or the editorial team of the ECCB's

*Czech Protestant News*. I cannot quite

remember which of these two groups had convened on the day in question; yet, I still recall that Eva's thoughtful remarks and ready smile quickly revealed why her many friends in the United States speak of her with such affectionate regard and deep respect.

Of course, every member of the Diaconia's national staff is admirably devoted to finding practical and creative ways to develop, oversee, and support all thirty-three of the social service centers through which ECCB congregations help show God's love to persons who are handicapped, ill, elderly, alone, or in other situations of need. Many of you will recall the passionate manner in which its director, Pavel Vychopen, describes the crucial role that the Diaconia may play in reaching out to the highly-secularized Czech society, and others of you will remember additional diaconal workers whom you have met in the Czech Republic. Yet, Eva's gifts are unique in some significant respects.

Those of you who know Eva probably have a favorite memory of extraordinary times that you have been able to spend with her, and I am no exception. Indeed, I am privileged to recall traveling back to Prague with Eva following the dedication of ECCB's new Hospice in 2004. After presiding over the celebratory opening of that splendid facility in

the northeastern part of the Czech Republic, Eva joined a group of international guests for an over-night stay at a nearby church retreat center and a side trip to Litomyšl the following day. Then, she took that group to the site of a new ECCB church which was in the process of being built next to a secular social service center located in the midst of a large communist-era housing complex in the southern section of Prague. Notwithstanding the intense activity that must have characterized preparations for the dedication of the hospice, Eva was eager to show us the progress that was being made on that building. You see, she is a key member of that pioneering congregation, so she wanted to get people excited about that ground-breaking project (**which will be dedicated this coming Sunday, October 8**). Upon leaving that site, Eva's hospitable spirit continued to prevail, as she drove John and me to our apartment, although that "detour" delayed her return to her own family.

This is just one example of the tireless dedication and kindness that Eva consistently displays, whether she is responding to work colleagues, international guests, people in need, or church friends. Thus, I was not surprised, but am delighted to tell you, that on Tuesday, April 25, Eva went to the Dutch Embassy in Prague where she had been invited to speak about diaconal work. Upon arriving, she found herself in the midst of family, co-workers, and friends. In their presence, Ida L. Van Veldhuizen-Rotehbucher, the Netherlands' ambassador to the Czech Republic, presented Eva with a commendation for outstanding service to society – the Order of Oranje-Nassau – given in the name of Her Majesty, the Dutch Queen Beatrix. In that moment, majesty recognized humility, and the greatness of service was honored. May other friends of Christ who similarly have eyes to see join Eva in fostering grace and peace in gentle and trustworthy ways.

## **BRIDGES - On Singing and Signing**

by Joyce Michael

As John and I begin to turn our attention toward Prague, a few strong memories seem to be inviting me to share some recollections that call forth similar feelings, although one occurred in Prague and the other took place in Ohio. Usually, I resist drawing such parallels, lest I misrepresent the uniqueness of either setting. However, the time may have come for me to reflect a bit on some transcending themes.

In the fall of 2005, John and I worshipped with a congregation in the Nusle section of Prague. We went there to attend the installation of an associate pastor and to support the full-time pastor of that church. You see, Irena had led the singing at the Bible study that John had presented at the international Gathering of Christians, which had taken place in the spring, and we had wanted to visit her congregation ever since.

In keeping with John's out-going spirit, we made our way to a pew near the front of the sanctuary. A feeling of serenity filled that sunny room, as Irena picked up her guitar to lead the congregation in a chorus that she had selected specifically for that day. Suddenly, her words of introduction assumed a personal cast, as she looked our way and said, "I would like John and Joyce to sing the first verse in English, and then we will all join in." I was surprised. Although Irena assumed that John and I would know the song, we had never seen it before, and its tricky rhythm and complex melody line did not bode an "easy read." Yet, suddenly, as if on cue, I heard my rather scratchy voice joining John's well-modulated tones in singing our "assigned" verse. In no time at all, our "solo" was over, and as the congregation joined in, I dared to make as many mistakes as I wanted. When the song had ended, I was surprised to discover that I did not feel embarrassed by the fact that my "sight-reading" had been heard by everyone in the room. Somehow, missed rhythms and wrong notes seemed incidental compared with the spirit of unity that filled the room. The part of me that likes to do things right had given way to the part of me that enjoys letting experiences be just as they are....

I had nearly forgotten that morning until late August, 2006 when John and I worshipped at the Oak Hill Presbyterian Church in Akron, Ohio. We had gone there to renew John's long-standing ties with that congregation, and knowing that we would be sharing a "moment for mission," we had again taken a seat near the front of that tranquil sanctuary. At various points, the service was punctuated by special music consisting of recorded songs that were signed by two women and their daughters. Those beautiful movements complemented the tunes' thoughtful words, and gave us a chance to experience one of the ways that hearing-impaired people can enter into music's depths. As I watched, I concluded that people who can both hear and see are doubly blessed when melodies are signed as well as sung.

However, an entirely different opportunity to participate soon presented itself, as the whole congregation was invited to sign one of the song's refrains. Since I am a relatively-uncoordinated individual, there were some movements that I did not manage to figure out before the song ended. Yet, there I stood, right in the front of that sanctuary, trying my best to sing by signing. My movements were small and constrained, rather than elegant and inspiring. However, that did not seem to matter. Again, I found myself doing what I had been invited to do, as if there is something more important than "getting it right." Under other circumstances, I might have been self-conscious and self-bound. However, missed turns and crumpled arcs again seemed incidental compared with the spirit of unity that filled the room. Thus, I am bound to conclude that "there's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea," which has the potential to transform our customary self-preoccupations and to command a faithful response, no matter whether we are "here" or "there."

## **BRIDGES - Re-Connecting**

by Joyce Michael

Returning to the Czech Republic after six months of interpretation assignment in the United States was an unusual experience. In many ways, it was like coming “home” to a specific location, customary responsibilities, and cherished routines. Yet, so much had happened since John and I had left Prague on May 1<sup>st</sup> that I hardly knew how to begin to reconnect.

However, when I ventured to the ECCB's national offices a couple of days after our return, it was almost as if we had not been away. Warm greetings were accompanied by descriptions of tasks that needed attention and decisions that needed to be made. In some ways, it seemed as if nothing had changed. Yet, as I began to translate articles for the next edition of Czech Protestant News, it was clear that much had happened. A staff retreat in Hungary, Professor Jakub Trojan's “premier” of his controversial new book at the annual meeting of the Friends of the Protestant Theological Faculty, and the dedication of a new church building in the Southern City section of Prague were just a few of the events that simultaneously filled me with a burst of excitement and a sense of being “on the outside.”

That ambiguous feeling quickly disappeared when I made my way to worship on the first Sunday in November. The sanctuary was packed, but the seats that John and I regularly occupy were waiting. The service was long, but without tedium, as the rich harmonies of Naše Zpěvci (“Our Singers”) added an especially meditative cast to our celebration of Holy Communion. Moreover, the warmth that pervaded the whole service was particularly evident as the pastors lovingly served the final communicants, two young boys who had been unable to find a place in the last large circle that had gathered around the worship table.

After the service, I enjoyed some interesting conversations with friends whom I had not seen for months, but who easily resumed a thoughtful and personal manner of relating. For instance, as I waited with a friend for an opening in the “wall of people” that filled the entrance hallway following worship, we began to discuss the drift toward self-gratification that characterizes the religious scene in a variety of places these days. “Maybe there are fewer serious Christians in the world than we would like to think,” he quizzically sighed, just before another friend summoned me to a quiet corner to describe several exciting and saddening events that had transpired while we were away. That conversation was also full and rich, and as I left the church, with a lively Czech hymn ringing in my head, I had a strong sense of home-coming, which grew even more pronounced the next weekend.

Indeed, when Jon Chapman and Burkhard Paetzold arrived on November 11, so that Jon could begin to become acquainted with PC(USA)'s partner churches in this part of the world, my John and I were propelled into an adventure of re-connecting. A luncheon meeting with Dean Martin Prudký acquainted me with some of the exciting new programs that are emerging at the Protestant Theological Faculty and with the forms that future contacts between American thinkers and our partner seminary may take. Thought-provoking discussions with Eva Grollová and Pavel Vychopen of the ECCB's Diaconia also provided valuable up-dates on a variety of issues. Likewise, a meeting with the American Working Group explored a host of questions and possibilities in ways that promise to yield tangible results and lasting connections.

Yet, opportunities for serious conversation and amicable interaction were, by far, the most cherished feature of those days of reunion. In retrospect, it seems to me that such occasions were undergirded by the spirit of reverence, hospitality, and delight which characterized the worship service that Jon, Burkhard, and I attended at the newly-dedicated church in the Southern City. That moving event clearly demonstrated that even when we have assembled in a new place with unknown people, the art of worship is uniquely able to bring us home to the heart of love. Thus, the interactions that go on after we have moved beyond the walls of the sanctuary and have re-entered the world of everyday affairs may be distinguished by dynamics of openness and enhanced by rhythms of grace.

## **BRIDGES - Communing Together**

by Joyce Michael

It is New Year's Eve in Prague, and firecrackers are popping all about! However, I remain focused on Christmas Eve, which climaxed with the mid-night mass that I attended with my landlord and landlady at a small Roman Catholic Church in our neighborhood. I had been eagerly anticipating that event because a joyful Christmas mass written by a Czech composer named Jan Ryba in 1796 was to be incorporated into the service. John and I had been privileged to hear the Ryba Mass performed in concert on other occasions, but I supposed that it would have particular power in the context of an actual worship service.

As we entered the candle-lit church, the darkness seemed comforting and peaceful, but suddenly, at the stroke of midnight, the sanctuary became as bright as day! Light had broken into the darkness; the Prince of Peace had been born; a new day had dawned, whether we were ready or not. I was suddenly filled with the sense of hope that I had experienced at other midnight masses which I attended during my first years in Prague.

Ryba's music provided a moving backdrop for the scripture, homily, and Eucharistic liturgy. There was warmth, beauty, and radiance in that place, but I was particularly struck when I heard the priest stressing that the cup of the new covenant is "FOR ALL OF YOU." You see, while John and I were in the U.S.A., someone told us that Catholics now receive both the bread and the wine during communion. That was a surprise to us, but the priest placed such emphasis on the words "FOR ALL OF YOU" that I wondered if communion "in both kinds" had become a reality in the Catholic Church. However, when the Eucharist was served, the communicants were given only the bread; the wine was reserved for the priests. Thus, I was struck anew by the radical departure represented by an ecumenical communion service that I had experienced earlier in the month.

Upon returning to Prague, I received an invitation to a meeting of the Czech Ecumenical Forum of Christian Women whose membership includes both Catholics and Protestants. I was excited to read that during Advent, that group would be celebrating the Eucharist together for the very first time. That event would be especially significant in this country where both bread and wine were first served to lay Christians at the Church of Martin-in-the-Wall in 1414. That act led to centuries of struggle between advocates of Jan Hus and staunch Catholics whose brutal Counter-reformation measures eventually crushed the Czech Reformation.

Despite the passage of time, resulting divisions between Czech Catholics and Protestants remain fairly entrenched. Yet, deep bonds have formed between the Catholic and Protestant women who are part of the Ecumenical Forum. Thus, the idea of holding a joint communion service received a positive response, which led to conversations with denominational leaders and a theological consideration of the Eucharist, led by a Hussite pastor. Eventually, a liturgy was prepared, and a letter was sent urging every member of the Forum to be present for this event. That invitation especially encouraged individuals who did not feel comfortable receiving communion in that context to come and be part of the circle of unity nevertheless.

On December 8, as I approached the meeting room at the Franciscan Monastery, the voices that I heard practicing the liturgy already manifested a sense of awe. Thus I wondered, "How will the sacrament be different from the rehearsal?" The answer was forth-coming: As the bread was passed around a long rectangular table, each woman received the gift of grace as an individual and we repeatedly received that gift as a group. Slowly and reverently, we took the bread and ate. Then, as the cup made its way around the table, we drank long draughts of love. Slowly and reverently, old divisions associated with the chalice were relinquished, and even those who did not partake of the elements were recipients of the new covenant.

In the wake of the divisions that often shatter our world and sometimes threaten our church, hope frequently seems to be a fragile commodity. Nevertheless, the Eucharist celebrated by the Ecumenical Forum offers a powerful symbol of the possibility that peace can prevail over strife, and that long nights of longing can be illumined by unity. As the priest so aptly stressed, the new covenant is FOR ALL OF US! Thus, we must dare to nurture the legacy of grace!

## **BRIDGES - Christmas in the Old Town Square**

by Joyce Michael

This evening (12/31/06), John and I went to the Old Town Square, so that he could take some pictures to include in his slideshow when we are in the United States for our next period of mission interpretation. Being relatively reserved people, we normally do not go to the center of the city on New Year's Eve. However, we had heard a lot about the beauty of the Old Town Square this year, so we wanted to check it out. Although there were people everywhere, we had a grand time, gazing at the Christmas tree, sampling special holiday foods, and watching children enjoy the antics of the balloon maker who had taken up residence on the stage that is erected in the square each year. Looking at the enchanted children, I remembered an evening just after Christmas in 2005 when I had stood before the same stage, watching a different sort of performance, which seemed to confirm my suspicion that this "a-theistic" society is actually much more "faithful" than that self-designation might imply.

In hopes of snapping a good photo, John had climbed up to the look-out point that enables Christmas visitors to get a panoramic glimpse of the square. However, I had stayed on the ground because the schedule of events posted next to the stage indicated that a "večerniček" would soon take place. "Večerniček" actually means "bedtime story." However, I know it best as a series of short children's cartoons that are shown on television every night just before the evening news. Being eager to be part of a live "večerniček," I was intrigued when a noisy troop of actors and actresses chaotically made their way onto the stage.

At first, I was clueless about what was happening, but it soon became apparent that we were watching an unusual dramatization of the Christmas story. For several scenes, there was much hilarity and some conflict between the shepherds who were central figures in the play. But, after a time, the mystery of Christmas was boldly proclaimed, as one of the performers repeatedly declared: "God has come to everyone." The cast of characters' response to this message was varied, but, in the end, everyone joined together in singing some of the beloved Czech carols that are a winsome part of holiday traditions here.

And, I do mean everyone! The performers on the stage, the lady next to me, the teenager standing a few steps away, and all of the other Czech people in the crowd, were singing: "Narodil se Kristus Pán, Veselme se." (Christ the Lord is born. Let us rejoice.) The corporate singing did not end when that beloved song concluded, however. Other traditional carols were crooned, and I had a strong sense that I was in the midst of a spontaneous act of worship in the one of the most public places in Prague.

"God has come to everyone," the actress declared, and all of the people sang, here in this extremely secular milieu, which nevertheless dares to dramatize the promise of Christmas for its children and their adult companions. It thus appears that this society may be uniquely able to receive and mediate the traditions of Christianity, in a way that does not compromise anyone's freedom to affirm a different faith or to adhere to no religion at all, but in a way which also makes this fact quite palpable: The mediator of God's love is always born into the midst of a noisy and chaotic world, whether it be peopled by rowdy shepherds, skeptical secularists, or faithful adherents.

Božena Komárková clearly anticipates this possibility when she writes: "Faith is not limited to the confessional community. The Spirit of God blows where it pleases, and is also audible to the Christian conscience in the profane world." In a public place – in an atheistic society – through a secular troop of actors, the Christmas truth may presence so recognizably that Christians and secularists alike are obliged to join together in heralding Christ's birth. Holy profanity, indeed!